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ANNALS OF CULTURE

Late Bloomers

Why do we equate genius with precocity?

by Malcolm Gladwell

1.

Ben Fountain was an associate in the real-estate practice at the Dallas offices of Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld, just a few years out of law school, when he decided he wanted to write fiction. The only thing Fountain had ever published was a law-review article. His literary training consisted of a handful of creative-writing classes in college. He had tried to write when he came home at night from work, but usually he was too tired to do much. He decided to quit his job.

"I was tremendously apprehensive," Fountain recalls. "I felt like I'd stepped off a cliff and I didn't know if the parachute was going to open. Nobody wants to waste their life, and I was doing well at the practice of law. I could have had a good career. And my parents were very proud of

me—my dad was so proud of me. . . . It was crazy."

He began his new life on a February morning—a Monday. He sat down at his kitchen table at 7:30 A.M. He made a plan. Every day, he would write until lunchtime. Then he would lie down on the floor for twenty minutes to rest his mind. Then he would return to work for a few more hours. He was a lawyer. He had discipline. "I figured out very early on that if I didn't get my writing done I felt terrible. So I always got my writing done. I treated it like a job. I did not procrastinate." His first story was about a stockbroker who uses inside information and crosses a moral line. It was sixty pages long and took him three months to write. When he finished that story, he went back to work and wrote another—and then another.

In his first year, Fountain sold two stories. He gained

confidence. He wrote a novel. He decided it wasn't very good, and he ended up putting it in a drawer. Then came what he describes as his dark period, when he adjusted his expectations and started again. He got a short story published in Harper's. A New York literary agent saw it and signed him up. He put together a collection of short stories titled "Brief Encounters with Che Guevara," and Ecco, a HarperCollins imprint, published it. The reviews were sensational. The Times Book Review called it "heartbreaking." It won the Hemingway Foundation/PEN award. It was named a No. 1 Book Sense Pick. It made major regional best-seller lists, was named one of the best books of the year by the San Francisco Chronicle, the Chicago Tribune, and Kirkus Reviews, and drew comparisons to Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh,

Robert Stone, and John le Carré.

Ben Fountain's rise sounds like a familiar story: the young man from the provinces suddenly takes the literary world by storm. But Ben Fountain's success was far from sudden. He quit his job at Akin, Gump in 1988. For every story he published in those early years, he had at least thirty rejections. The novel that he put away in a drawer took him four years. The dark period lasted for the entire second half of the nineteen-nineties. His breakthrough with "Brief " came in 2006, eighteen years after he first sat down to write at his kitchen table. The "young" writer from the provinces took the literary world by storm at the age of forty-eight.

2.

Genius, in the popular conception, is inextricably tied up with precocity—doing something truly creative, we're inclined to think, requires the freshness and exuberance and energy of youth. Orson Welles made his masterpiece, "Citizen Kane," at twenty-five. Herman Melville wrote a book a year through his late twenties, culminating, at age thirty-two, with "Moby-

Dick." Mozart wrote his breakthrough Piano Concerto No. 9 in E-Flat-Major at the age of twenty-one. In some creative forms, like lyric poetry, the importance of precocity has hardened into an iron law. How old was T. S. Eliot when he wrote "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" ("I grow old . . . I grow old")? Twenty-three. "Poets peak young," the creativity researcher James Kaufman maintains. Mihály Csikszentmihályi, the author of "Flow," agrees: "The most creative lyric verse is believed to be that written by the young." According to the Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner, a leading authority on creativity, "Lyric poetry is a domain where talent is discovered early, burns brightly, and then peters out at an early age."

A few years ago, an economist at the University of Chicago named David Galenson decided to find out whether this assumption about creativity was true. He looked through forty-seven major poetry anthologies published since 1980 and counted the poems that appear most frequently. Some people, of course, would quarrel with the notion that literary merit can be quantified. But Galenson simply wanted to poll a broad cross-section of literary scholars about which poems they felt were the most

important in the American canon. The top eleven are, in order, T. S. Eliot's "Prufrock," Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour," Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," William Carlos Williams's "Red Wheelbarrow," Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish," Ezra Pound's "The River Merchant's Wife," Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," Frost's "Mending Wall," Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man," and Williams's "The Dance." Those eleven were composed at the ages of twenty-three, forty-one, forty-eight, forty, twenty-nine, thirty, thirty, twenty-eight, thirty-eight, forty-two, and fifty-nine, respectively. There is no evidence, Galenson concluded, for the notion that lyric poetry is a young person's game. Some poets do their best work at the beginning of their careers. Others do their best work decades later. Forty-two per cent of Frost's anthologized poems were written after the age of fifty. For Williams, it's forty-four per cent. For Stevens, it's forty-nine per cent.

The same was true of film, Galenson points out in his study "Old Masters and Young Geniuses: The Two Life Cycles of Artistic Creativity." Yes, there was

Fountain went on. "And then it was, boom, 'I can take you there. I can take you to this person.' "

Fountain was riveted by Haiti. "It's like a laboratory, almost," he says. "Everything that's gone on in the last five hundred years—colonialism, race, power, politics, ecological disasters—it's all there in very concentrated form. And also I just felt, viscerally, pretty comfortable there." He made more trips to Haiti, sometimes for a week, sometimes for two weeks. He made friends. He invited them to visit him in Dallas. ("You haven't lived until you've had Haitians stay in your house," Fountain says.) "I mean, I was involved. I couldn't just walk away. There's this very nonrational, nonlinear part of the whole process. I had a pretty specific time era that I was writing about, and certain things that I needed to know. But there were other things I didn't really need to know. I met a fellow who was with Save the Children, and he was on the Central Plateau, which takes about twelve hours to get to on a bus, and I had no reason to go there. But I went up there. Suffered on that bus, and ate dust. It was a hard trip, but it was a glorious trip. It had nothing

to do with the book, but it wasn't wasted knowledge."

In "Brief Encounters with Che Guevara," four of the stories are about Haiti, and they are the strongest in the collection. They feel like Haiti; they feel as if they've been written from the inside looking out, not the outside looking in. "After the novel was done, I don't know, I just felt like there was more for me, and I could keep going, keep going deeper there," Fountain recalls. "Always there's something—always something—here for me. How many times have I been? At least thirty times."

Prodigies like Picasso, Galenson argues, rarely engage in that kind of open-ended exploration. They tend to be "conceptual," Galenson says, in the sense that they start with a clear idea of where they want to go, and then they execute it. "I can hardly understand the importance given to the word 'research,'" Picasso once said in an interview with the artist Marius de Zayas. "In my opinion, to search means nothing in painting. To find is the thing." He continued, "The several manners I have used in my art must not be considered as an evolution or as steps toward an unknown ideal of painting. . . . I have never made trials or experiments."

But late bloomers, Galenson says, tend to work the other way around. Their approach is experimental. "Their goals are imprecise, so their procedure is tentative and incremental," Galenson writes in "Old Masters and Young Geniuses," and he goes on:

The imprecision of their goals means that these artists rarely feel they have succeeded, and their careers are consequently often dominated by the pursuit of a single objective. These artists repeat themselves, painting the same subject many times, and gradually changing its treatment in an experimental process of trial and error. Each work leads to the next, and none is generally privileged over others, so experimental painters rarely make specific preparatory sketches or plans for a painting. They consider the production of a painting as a process of searching, in which they aim to discover the image in the course of making it; they typically believe that learning is a more important goal than making finished paintings. Experimental artists build their skills gradually over the course of their careers, improving their work slowly over long periods. These artists are perfectionists and are typically plagued by

frustration at their inability to achieve their goal.

Where Picasso wanted to find, not search, Cézanne said the opposite: "I seek in painting."

An experimental innovator would go back to Haiti thirty times. That's how that kind of mind figures out what it wants to do. When Cézanne was painting a portrait of the critic Gustave Geffroy, he made him endure eighty sittings, over three months, before announcing the project a failure. (The result is one of that string of masterpieces in the Musée "Orsay.) When Cézanne painted his dealer, Ambrose Vollard, he made Vollard arrive at eight in the morning and sit on a rickety platform until eleven-thirty, without a break, on a hundred and fifty occasions—before abandoning the portrait. He would paint a scene, then repaint it, then paint it again. He was notorious for slashing his canvases to pieces in fits of frustration.

Mark Twain was the same way. Galenson quotes the literary critic Franklin Rogers on Twain's trial-and-error method: "His routine procedure seems to have been to start a novel with

some structural plan which ordinarily soon proved defective, whereupon he would cast about for a new plot which would overcome the difficulty, rewrite what he had already written, and then push on until some new defect forced him to repeat the process once again." Twain fiddled and despaired and revised and gave up on "Huckleberry Finn" so many times that the book took him nearly a decade to complete. The Cézannes of the world bloom late not as a result of some defect in character, or distraction, or lack of ambition, but because the kind of creativity that proceeds through trial and error necessarily takes a long time to come to fruition.

One of the best stories in "Brief Encounters" is called "Near-Extinct Birds of the Central Cordillera." It's about an ornithologist taken hostage by the FARC guerrillas of Colombia. Like so much of Fountain's work, it reads with an easy grace. But there was nothing easy or graceful about its creation. "I struggled with that story," Fountain says. "I always try to do too much. I mean, I probably wrote five hundred pages of it in various incarnations." Fountain is at work right now on a novel. It was supposed to come out this year. It's late.

4.

Galenson's idea that creativity can be divided into these types—conceptual and experimental—has a number of important implications. For example, we sometimes think of late bloomers as late starters. They don't realize they're good at something until they're fifty, so of course they achieve late in life. But that's not quite right. Cézanne was painting almost as early as Picasso was. We also sometimes think of them as artists who are discovered late; the world is just slow to appreciate their gifts. In both cases, the assumption is that the prodigy and the late bloomer are fundamentally the same, and that late blooming is simply genius under conditions of market failure. What Galenson's argument suggests is something else—that late bloomers bloom late because they simply aren't much good until late in their careers.

"All these qualities of his inner vision were continually hampered and obstructed by Cézanne's incapacity to give sufficient verisimilitude to the personae of his drama," the great English art critic Roger Fry wrote of the early Cézanne. "With all his rare

endowments, he happened to lack the comparatively common gift of illustration, the gift that any draughtsman for the illustrated papers learns in a school of commercial art; whereas, to realize such visions as Cézanne's required this gift in high degree." In other words, the young Cézanne couldn't draw. Of "The Banquet," which Cézanne painted at thirty-one, Fry writes, "It is no use to deny that Cézanne has made a very poor job of it." Fry goes on, "More happily endowed and more integral personalities have been able to express themselves harmoniously from the very first. But such rich, complex, and conflicting natures as Cézanne's require a long period of fermentation." Cézanne was trying something so elusive that he couldn't master it until he'd spent decades practicing.

This is the vexing lesson of Fountain's long attempt to get noticed by the literary world. On the road to great achievement, the late bloomer will resemble a failure: while the late bloomer is revising and despairing and changing course and slashing canvases to ribbons after months or years, what he or she produces will look like the kind of thing produced

by the artist who will never bloom at all. Prodigies are easy. They advertise their genius from the get-go. Late bloomers are hard. They require forbearance and blind faith. (Let's just be thankful that Cézanne didn't have a guidance counsellor in high school who looked at his primitive sketches and told him to try accounting.) Whenever we find a late bloomer, we can't but wonder how many others like him or her we have thwarted because we prematurely judged their talents. But we also have to accept that there's nothing we can do about it. How can we ever know which of the failures will end up blooming?

Not long after meeting Ben Fountain, I went to see the novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, the author of the 2002 best-seller "Everything Is Illuminated." Fountain is a graying man, slight and modest, who looks, in the words of a friend of his, like a "golf pro from Augusta, Georgia." Foer is in his early thirties and looks barely old enough to drink. Fountain has a softness to him, as if years of struggle have worn away whatever sharp edges he once had. Foer gives the impression that if you touched him while he was in full conversational flight you would get an electric shock.

"I came to writing really by the back door," Foer said. "My wife is a writer, and she grew up keeping journals—you know, parents said, 'Lights out, time for bed,' and she had a little flashlight under the covers, reading books. I don't think I read a book until much later than other people. I just wasn't interested in it."

Foer went to Princeton and took a creative-writing class in his freshman year with Joyce Carol Oates. It was, he explains, "sort of on a whim, maybe out of a sense that I should have a diverse course load." He'd never written a story before. "I didn't really think anything of it, to be honest, but halfway through the semester I arrived to class early one day, and she said, 'Oh, I'm glad I have this chance to talk to you. I'm a fan of your writing.' And it was a real revelation for me."

Oates told him that he had the most important of writerly qualities, which was energy. He had been writing fifteen pages a week for that class, an entire story for each seminar. "Why does a dam with a crack in it leak so much?" he said, with a laugh. "There was just something in me, there was like a pressure."

As a sophomore, he took another creative-writing class. During the following summer, he went to Europe. He wanted to find the village in Ukraine where his grandfather had come from. After the trip, he went to Prague. There he read Kafka, as any literary undergraduate would, and sat down at his computer.

"I was just writing," he said. "I didn't know that I was writing until it was happening. I didn't go with the intention of writing a book. I wrote three hundred pages in ten weeks. I really wrote. I'd never done it like that."

It was a novel about a boy named Jonathan Safran Foer who visits the village in Ukraine where his grandfather had come from. Those three hundred pages were the first draft of "Everything Is Illuminated"—the exquisite and extraordinary novel that established Foer as one of the most distinctive literary voices of his generation. He was nineteen years old.

Foer began to talk about the other way of writing books, where you painstakingly honed your craft, over years and years. "I couldn't do that," he said. He seemed

puzzled by it. It was clear that he had no understanding of how being an experimental innovator would work. "I mean, imagine if the craft you're trying to learn is to be an original. How could you learn the craft of being an original?"

He began to describe his visit to Ukraine. "I went to the shtetl where my family came from. It's called Trachimbrod, the name I use in the book. It's a real place. But you know what's funny? It's the single piece of research that made its way into the book." He wrote the first sentence, and he was proud of it, and then he went back and forth in his mind about where to go next. "I spent the first week just having this debate with myself about what to do with this first sentence. And once I made the decision, I felt liberated to just create—and it was very explosive after that."

If you read "Everything Is Illuminated," you end up with the same feeling you get when you read "Brief Encounters with Che Guevara"—the sense of transport you experience when a work of literature draws you into its own world. Both are works of art. It's just that, as artists, Fountain and Foer could not be less alike. Fountain went to Haiti thirty times. Foer went to Trachimbrod just once. "I

mean, it was nothing," Foer said. "I had absolutely no experience there at all. It was just a springboard for my book. It was like an empty swimming pool that had to be filled up." Total time spent getting inspiration for his novel: three days.

5.

Ben Fountain did not make the decision to quit the law and become a writer all by himself. He is married and has a family. He met his wife, Sharon, when they were both in law school at Duke. When he was doing real-estate work at Akin, Gump, she was on the partner track in the tax practice at Thompson & Knight. The two actually worked in the same building in downtown Dallas. They got married in 1985, and had a son in April of 1987. Sharie, as Fountain calls her, took four months of maternity leave before returning to work. She made partner by the end of that year.

"We had our son in a day care downtown," she recalls. "We would drive in together, one of us would take him to day care, the other one would go to work. One of us would pick him up, and

then, somewhere around eight o'clock at night, we would have him bathed, in bed, and then we hadn't even eaten yet, and we'd be looking at each other, going, 'This is just the beginning.' " She made a face. "That went on for maybe a month or two, and Ben's like, 'I don't know how people do this.' We both agreed that continuing at that pace was probably going to make us all miserable. Ben said to me, 'Do you want to stay home?' Well, I was pretty happy in my job, and he wasn't, so as far as I was concerned it didn't make any sense for me to stay home. And I didn't have anything besides practicing law that I really wanted to do, and he did. So I said, 'Look, can we do this in a way that we can still have some day care and so you can write?' And so we did that."

Ben could start writing at seven-thirty in the morning because Sharie took their son to day care. He stopped working in the afternoon because that was when he had to pick him up, and then he did the shopping and the household chores. In 1989, they had a second child, a daughter. Fountain was a full-fledged North Dallas stay-at-home dad.

"When Ben first did this, we talked about the fact that it might not work, and we talked about, generally, 'When will we know that it really isn't working?' and I'd say, 'Well, give it ten years,' " Sharie recalled. To her, ten years didn't seem unreasonable. "It takes a while to decide whether you like something or not," she says. And when ten years became twelve and then fourteen and then sixteen, and the kids were off in high school, she stood by him, because, even during that long stretch when Ben had nothing published at all, she was confident that he was getting better. She was fine with the trips to Haiti, too. "I can't imagine writing a novel about a place you haven't at least tried to visit," she says. She even went with him once, and on the way into town from the airport there were people burning tires in the middle of the road.

"I was making pretty decent money, and we didn't need two incomes," Sharie went on. She has a calm, unflappable quality about her. "I mean, it would have been nice, but we could live on one."

Sharie was Ben's wife. But she was also—to borrow a term from long ago—his patron. That word has a condescending edge to it today, because we think it far

more appropriate for artists (and everyone else for that matter) to be supported by the marketplace. But the marketplace works only for people like Jonathan Safran Foer, whose art emerges, fully realized, at the beginning of their career, or Picasso, whose talent was so blindingly obvious that an art dealer offered him a hundred-and-fifty-franc-a-month stipend the minute he got to Paris, at age twenty. If you are the type of creative mind that starts without a plan, and has to experiment and learn by doing, you need someone to see you through the long and difficult time it takes for your art to reach its true level.

This is what is so instructive about any biography of Cézanne. Accounts of his life start out being about Cézanne, and then quickly turn into the story of Cézanne's circle. First and foremost is always his best friend from childhood, the writer Émile Zola, who convinces the awkward misfit from the provinces to come to Paris, and who serves as his guardian and protector and coach through the long, lean years.

Here is Zola, already in Paris, in a letter to the young Cézanne back in Provence.

Note the tone, more paternal than fraternal:

You ask me an odd question. Of course one can work here, as anywhere else, if one has the will. Paris offers, further, an advantage you can't find elsewhere: the museums in which you can study the old masters from 11 to 4. This is how you must divide your time. From 6 to 11 you go to a studio to paint from a live model; you have lunch, then from 12 to 4 you copy, in the Louvre or the Luxembourg, whatever masterpiece you like. That will make up nine hours of work. I think that ought to be enough.

Zola goes on, detailing exactly how Cézanne could manage financially on a monthly stipend of a hundred and twenty-five francs:

I'll reckon out for you what you should spend. A room at 20 francs a month; lunch at 18 sous and dinner at 22, which makes two francs a day, or 60 francs a month. . . . Then you have the studio to pay for: the Atelier Suisse, one of the least expensive, charges, I think, 10 francs. Add 10 francs for canvas, brushes, colors; that makes 100. So you'll have 25 francs left for laundry, light, the

thousand little needs that turn up.

Camille Pissarro was the next critical figure in Cézanne's life. It was Pissarro who took Cézanne under his wing and taught him how to be a painter. For years, there would be periods in which they went off into the country and worked side by side.

Then there was Ambrose Vollard, the sponsor of Cézanne's first one-man show, at the age of fifty-six. At the urging of Pissarro, Renoir, Degas, and Monet, Vollard hunted down Cézanne in Aix. He spotted a still-life in a tree, where it had been flung by Cézanne in disgust. He poked around the town, putting the word out that he was in the market for Cézanne's canvases. In "Lost Earth: A Life of Cézanne," the biographer Philip Callow writes about what happened next:

Before long someone appeared at his hotel with an object wrapped in a cloth. He sold the picture for 150 francs, which inspired him to trot back to his house with the dealer to inspect several more magnificent Cézannes. Vollard paid a thousand francs for the job lot, then on the way out was nearly hit on the head by a canvas that had been

overlooked, dropped out the window by the man's wife. All the pictures had been gathering dust, half buried in a pile of junk in the attic.

All this came before Vollard agreed to sit a hundred and fifty times, from eight in the morning to eleven-thirty, without a break, for a picture that Cézanne disgustingly abandoned. Once, Vollard recounted in his memoir, he fell asleep, and toppled off the makeshift platform. Cézanne berated him, incensed: "Does an apple move?" This is called friendship.

Finally, there was Cézanne's father, the banker Louis-Auguste. From the time Cézanne first left Aix, at the age of twenty-two, Louis-Auguste paid his bills, even when Cézanne gave every indication of being nothing more than a failed dilettante. But for Zola, Cézanne would have remained an unhappy banker's son in Provence; but for Pissarro, he would never have learned how to paint; but for Vollard (at the urging of Pissarro, Renoir, Degas, and Monet), his canvases would have rotted away in some attic; and, but for his father, Cézanne's long apprenticeship would have been a financial impossibility. That is an

extraordinary list of patrons. The first three—Zola, Pissarro, and Vollard—would have been famous even if Cézanne never existed, and the fourth was an unusually gifted entrepreneur who left Cézanne four hundred thousand francs when he died. Cézanne didn't just have help. He had a dream team in his corner.

This is the final lesson of the late bloomer: his or her success is highly contingent on the efforts of others. In biographies of Cézanne, Louis-Auguste invariably comes across as a kind of grumpy philistine, who didn't appreciate his son's genius. But Louis-Auguste didn't have to support Cézanne all those years. He would have been within his rights to make his son get a real job, just as Sharie might well have said no to her husband's repeated trips to the chaos of Haiti. She could have argued that she had some right to the life style of her profession and status—that she deserved to drive a BMW, which is what power couples in North Dallas drive, instead of a Honda Accord, which is what she settled for.

But she believed in her husband's art, or perhaps, more simply, she believed in

her husband, the same way Zola and Pissarro and Vollard and—in his own, querulous way—Louis-Auguste must have believed in Cézanne. Late bloomers' stories are invariably love stories, and this may be why we have such difficulty with them. We'd like to think that mundane matters like loyalty, steadfastness, and the willingness to keep writing checks to support what looks like failure have nothing to do with something as rarefied as genius. But sometimes genius is anything but rarefied; sometimes it's just the thing that emerges after twenty years of working at your kitchen table.

"Sharie never once brought up money, not once—never," Fountain said. She was sitting next to him, and he looked at her in a way that made it plain that he understood how much of the credit for "Brief Encounters" belonged to his wife. His eyes welled up with tears. "I never felt any pressure from her," he said. "Not even covert, not even implied."

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